

(February 14, 2009) Daily Herald: So How Much Stimulus Do We Get?

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With President Barack Obama expected to sign the \$787 billion economic stimulus package Monday, America is on the verge of a gold rush as counties, states and interest groups scramble to get a share.

While officials are still crunching the numbers, it appears Illinois could secure more than \$4 billion for everything from education funding to road improvements and job training programs.

Of the \$4 billion outlined in congressional analysis reports, nearly \$1.8 billion will go toward public works projects, which includes \$468 million for mass transit and \$936 million for road and bridge repairs. And that's just the beginning of the federal cash influx, a good chunk of which is sure to come to Chicago and the suburbs.

The state's education and operations funds are set to get a \$1.7 billion infusion. Add to that nearly \$300 million for Medicaid and several hundred million dollars more for law enforcement, job training, energy conservation efforts and water projects.

Overall, the stimulus package intended to jump-start the economy includes \$281 billion for national tax relief and \$506 billion for transportation, education, the environment, science and technology, public housing and health care.

The cash, set to be added to the national deficit, is sorely needed in Illinois, Gov. Pat Quinn has said. The state is facing a \$9 billion shortfall, prodding lawmakers to contemplate significant budget cuts and painful tax hikes.

Quinn spokesman Bob Reed said "every bit helps," but he wasn't yet sure exactly how the federal cash would affect the state's budget woes.

Suburban lawmakers on Capitol Hill voted along partisan lines on the measure, with Republicans calling the plan a waste of taxpayer dollars that won't provide its promised economic kick.

Overall the plan passed the House Friday 246-183, with no Republicans support. Then Friday night the Senate passed the plan 60-38.

Local opponents included U.S. representatives Mark Kirk of Highland Park, Peter Roskam of Wheaton, Judy Biggert of Hinsdale and Don Manzullo of the Rockford area.

The spending plan further "jeopardizes our economy and long-term prosperity," Roskam said in a statement.

Supporters included Democratic U.S. representatives Melissa Bean of Barrington and Bill Foster of Geneva as well as Democratic senators Dick Durbin of Springfield and Roland Burris of Chicago.

Bean called the combination of tax cuts and job-creating public works projects "bold, broad-based and balanced."

In the last year, Illinois' unemployment rate has risen from 5.3 percent to 7.6 percent, she said in a statement, and Obama's stimulus plan "is necessary to preserve and create jobs and spending."

About half the money going to states must be spent within 120 days on "shovel-ready" projects and the remainder used within a year.

While getting the bill through Congress was a messy process, some anticipate even bigger battles when the money gets to state authorities.

Certain agencies, such as the Illinois Department of Transportation, have discretion to pick which projects are funded. The state anticipates it will get \$936 million for highways and bridges.

The transportation department on Friday issued a list of \$693 million in projects that would be ready to go in 120 days. The public has 15 days to comment on the plan. The agency will provide a list of one-year projects later on.

District engineers will have the final say on which projects get priority based on safety and traffic criteria, agency spokeswoman Paris Erwin said.

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn urged the state to give the lion's share of transportation funding to the city and collar counties, saying he was concerned the region would be shortchanged.

"The metropolitan area is the economic engine of the state," Blankenhorn said.

Some of the dollars, however, such as money for public transit, are allocated by federal formulas.

Transportation experts estimated the Chicago Transit Authority would receive \$226 million, Metra \$132 million and Pace \$31 million.

Metra has already identified a number of needs including a new 35th Street station, additional parking and re-manufactured locomotives, Metra Executive Director Phil Pagano noted.

Meanwhile, Illinois education leaders said Friday they didn't yet know how their share of the bailout would be spent because the cash is likely tied to strict regulations on disbursement.

"We're waiting to see just like everyone else," said Mary Ann Fergus, spokeswoman for the Illinois State Board of Education.

Nationwide, the stimulus bill sets aside \$53.6 billion for education in the form of a State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, which is designed to prevent the layoff of teachers and the elimination of key educational programs. Of that amount, \$40.6 billion will go to local school districts, \$5 billion to states as bonus grants for academic performance and \$8 billion to states for critical needs that include education.

About \$1 billion has been allocated for airport modernization programs, and indications are that O'Hare International Airport won't lose out despite lobbying by Bensenville leaders who oppose the expansion.

Western Springs Democrat U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, who sits on the powerful House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, promised he'd work to ensure O'Hare gets its share.

Illinois' share

Here is a look at some of the Illinois funding in the stimulus plan, according to a U.S. House analysis obtained by the Daily Herald:

\$1.7 billion

Roads & bridges

\$936 million

Transit

\$468 million

Medicaid

\$290 million

Clean water improvements

\$249 million

Energy saving programs

\$177 million

Job training

\$154 million

Law enforcement

\$85 million